

**TOWN OF FAIRFAX
COUNCIL MEMBER REPORT**

To: Mayor and Town Council

Meeting Date: April 7, 2010

From: Council Member John Reed

Subject: Smart Meter Report

Recently, PG&E has been rolling out a program that they have been developing over the last couple of years without public input, designed they say to save energy. The water district has a plan to use a similar system to both monitor and control water use. While the savings goals are laudable, the method is open to criticism, especially as low impact educational alternatives exist.

PG&E's system relies on "smart meters", on both gas and electric meters, which send and receive radio frequencies every 45 seconds or so around the clock. They communicate with a multitude of radio transmitters that are going to be required by law to be installed on all appliances in your home. The energy use of all of these will then be relayed by radio to a network on power poles and in other adjacent houses. In this way, PG&E will be provided with an up to the minute record of your energy use. They claim that this will allow them to provide you with information that will encourage you to change your use patterns, thus saving energy.

The water district plans to use the knowledge gained through their similar system to both monitor and control water use, especially in irrigation systems, which could be switched off by them remotely during rainy periods, for instance.

Beyond predictable comments about "big brother", areas in which PG&E's system is up and running are reporting sharply increased electric bills from 30 to 350 percent (blamed by PG&E on "previously inaccurate meters"; however no one has reported decreased bills). Meters are not easily read by the consumer, and have been likened to a "black box". A class action suit has been initiated in the Bakersfield area as a result of this issue.

Some have voiced health concerns about "a sea of radio waves emanating from and being amplified by the home environment", as these various devices communicate with each other and the wireless network around the clock. The city of Sebastopol has initiated an action designed to prohibit the use of this technology there.

The utility also hopes to save money by eliminating a large number of jobs – those of the meter readers. PG&E has offered to retrain these workers for more sedentary desk jobs, and doubtless some will benefit from this. Presumably others may search for an alternative outdoor job with another employer.

An alternative to this high-tech solution to energy consumption exists in the form of education. People are becoming more aware of energy use and its consequences (beyond the bills), and many are learning to turn off appliances and lights when not in use, and to unplug or otherwise disconnect "power hungry" items such as computers and TVs (which can use 90% of the "in use" energy even when turned off).

This low tech solution also avoids the energy consumption by the monitoring and wireless radio devices, as well as the costs associated with the entire smart metering system, currently estimated by PG&E to be 2.2 billion dollars.